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## on Kloefkorn, Tipton, McKeowen & Harkness

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## SOME POETRY FROM THE SMALL PRESSES

Editors Note: We hope this Small Press review section will be a regular feature from now on. So far the publishers have responded very well and we apologize for not being able to comment on all the books received. If the overall tone of the section seems unusually favorable, well. . . We confess. This is as much to promote the little guys as anything else. If we don't like it, we won't tell you about it. PATRONIZE THE SMALL PRESSES! Since many of them are doing such fine work, you'll be giving yourself a gift and giving the guys at Atheneum a raspberry.

R. W.

### LOONY

William Kloefkorn

Apple

Box 2271

Springfield, Illinois 62705, \$2.95

This is a book-length poem. Sixty-five sections, monologues, soliloquies and beautiful passages from the life of *loony*, the village idiot. He is, of course, something of an outcast, though like all such local characters, he is looked upon by the townspeople as community property.

. . .no respectable  
God-fearing Nebraska town,  
without a fight,  
lets its loony die.

(11)

Still, he is different. Where the "normal" children are cruel and teasing, loony is genuinely gay and good-natured. Where the majority of the adults are obtuse and narrow, loony possesses a simple, lovely wisdom: the wisdom of the heart, of innocence and naivete.

Usually loony's language is our language, a diction only slightly different from Lloyd Fetrow's or the Chevy dealer's or any of the other townsfolk. But William Kloefkorn's power is subtle, and by a single word or phrase or sentence, each section becomes loony's exclusively. Every poem/section—the whole book—turns on the quiet introduction of loony's point of view. He speaks for 16 lines or so of the Santa Fe train, then, in closing the section, says:

If I move just one step closer  
I can smell the wheels,  
O bigger than the biggest boy in town,  
and maybe gentler.

(4)

So, turn by turn, on every page, we discover loony, his life and most importantly, his relationship to his fellow men.

There are lines and phrases in the book that seem bothersome at first. Some are simply trite and others smack of schmaltz. But it is not so much Kloefkorn speaking as it is the village idiot, and that perfect innocence comes back and allows lines like "some sweet starry night" or, when talking to a dog, "O loyal little friend." Sometimes a section will even grow from a cliché. loony says: "I know what I know" or "(I) wasn't born yesterday." Late in the poem he says:

Mr. Terrell says that sometimes he thinks  
everybody in the world  
has at least one screw loose,  
except me and thee.  
And sometimes, Mr. Terrell says,  
he wonders about thee.

(61)

Language is fresh for loony. And that outlook is infectious. One passes right over the clichés without recognizing them, for the next line is often perfect: "I can feel their handholds, / bruises thick as thumbs." Or ". . . the night is sweet as malt / upon the tongue." Or, describing Bert the mechanic at work:



And Bert not far away  
his head and chest cut off  
inside the open catfish mouth  
of a Ford or a Mercury.

(14)

There is no way to give a sense of *loony* in a review, except perhaps to reprint a whole section. Even then, you see only one sixty-fifth of a poem. And finally, of those sixty-five sections, I have at least 58 favorites. Below is section 13. In it, there is the actual situation of the poem/section; there is, in front of that like a scrim sheet or a gauze, loony's retelling of the action, his reality; there is the relationship between loony and the townspeople; and finally, there is a conclusion, loony's synthesis of all the above elements. Not what it means—just what things seem to come to for loony. Meanings are not loony's concern. Perhaps because we can abstract such things as meanings, we envy loony. Kloefkorn makes it work: loony, the poor slob, how lucky he is.

13

That hot August night  
I was the first to reach her,  
her face laid open like a movie.  
There was rubber in the air,  
and the driver of the car,  
not able to ungrip his fingers,  
stuck like a fly on glue behind the wheel.  
And the girl seemed not much heavier  
than a scrap of pine,  
her little blood  
a warm uneasy tickling at my hands.  
And someone said later  
he had never noticed them before,  
the hands,  
how brown,  
how big as buckets.  
And the child hung on,  
its face full grown now—  
saying *hello hello* to loony  
from its twisted smile.

*loony* takes the place of the magazine *Apple*, at least for numbers 10 and 11. It was printed in a first edition of 1200 copies on economical but high-quality stock, perfectly bound. Some presses use better paper, fancier print or more elaborate covers, but Apple

has done exactly as more small presses should. They've printed a fine looking, affordable and wonderfully written book. With a Harper & Row print job, *loony* would cost \$5 in paper. Even then it would be a good deal.

## BITTERSWEET

James Tipton  
Cold Mountain Press  
4406 Duval  
Austin, Texas 78751, \$1.50

*Bittersweet* is also a book-length poem. Sort of. It's a pamphlet or a mini-book filled with mini-poems. That is to say, there are three lines on every page. No more, for these are forms, Americanized forms, of the haiku. Syllabically, they don't fit, none of that five/ seven/ five stuff. And thematically, there is not often that leap between two disparate images that occurs in the Japanese. Still, the book works, as a whole and in sections, and these nicely done little poems come as close to the real spirit of the haiku as anything else in our language. Perhaps the best, the most striking poem in the book is this:

all day  
shoveling sheep manure  
the mind clear at last

The printing is very impressive. Each tercet is shifted slightly up or down from the poem on the opposite page, so the three lines don't become monotonous after ten or eleven times. It is the tiniest perfectly bound book I've ever seen, and somehow, that makes it even more appealing. Bookshelves swallow it, and I suppose from the outside, *Bittersweet* seems awfully slight for \$1.50. But Tipton is a superb craftsman. His poems are small and valuable. At \$1.50, *Playboy* is a five-foot square plateglass window, while *Bittersweet* is a thumbnail-sized diamond.



## THE LUMINOUS REVOLVER

Tom McKeown

Sumac Press

PO Box 39

Fremont, Michigan 49412, \$2.45 (paper)

Another of Tom McKeown's full length books is called *The House of Water*. That title seems significant not only to the book that wears it, but also to this one. Both collections are filled with such structures: water houses, malevolent clouds, bulging darknesses. . .things that ought not to stand, but that do. Dozens of startling, vivid images. In fact, when you move into *The Luminous Revolver*, you are crossing the border into a strange country, a map detailed with images. And McKeown is the master cartographer, a virtuoso imagist.

From the first poem we are impressed by images. There seems to be no limit to the poet's imaginative powers; no limit to the possibilities of images. Imagesimagesimages. And that is what soon becomes the problem. That is why the word "images" has already appeared half a dozen times in this review. Beyond, once again, the images, there is very little to say about these poems. They are well done, of course, finely crafted. But like water houses and bulging darknesses, they are all too often, empty. Beyond the analysis of certain metaphors, the intellect goes hungry: the reader does no unnecessary thinking. And, despite an imagistic rendering of any number of emotional states, the poems show, most of the time, no feeling at all.

Here is a poem called "Watching the Storm."

I listen to the ticking  
in the storm's eye

to the shrill alarms  
that have been set for us

Above the flashing fingernails  
of the leaves

the bulky clouds break down  
like old cars

The heavy air collects its toll  
and enters us

How much we have given up  
will never be known

Well, the images are fine—at least five of them, one per couplet til the last two lines. And the close seems only appropriate: the summing up of what came before. However, it's the sum that eludes me. My long addition comes up zero and the formula seems to go: images + knot = So What?

But it's a successful way to write. McKeown is a fine writer who knows how to use his language. You can find these poems everywhere from *The New Yorker* to *kayak*, from *Harper's* to *Happiness Holding Tank*. It's not as though McKeown cannot do otherwise. There are passages, lines and stanzas in *The Luminous Revolver* that prove he can. There are places in this book where a marvelous talent comes through. There are poems now and then that will simply astound a reader. To sort of parallel the poem quoted above, here's another called "Watching the Horse."

I am tired of cars  
& all the heavy weights  
of the city

I drop everything

sit by a pasture  
& watch a chestnut horse

as he winds the clock  
of my body  
with his cantering

Call it an emotional stance, a rich feeling, but this poem shows an ability beyond the formulaic image / knot routine. There is a sense of the poet here, and of the poet's world and the relationship between the two. There is a warmth here that is rare and ought to be cherished.

*The Luminous Revolver* is not a bad book. It is, frankly, a pretty good book—McKeown's first full-length volume—and by anyone else it would be very impressive. But we can expect far better from Tom McKeown and I think we'll get it. He can write. And most of us, after all, are very comfortable with images. The ease with which image-laden poems find their way into print ought to tell us



something: that we have gone astray? or gotten cold and distant. . . ? Perhaps we sometimes forget that poetry needs to be more than just words and cleverness. McKeown knows that, and someday soon he'll show us how good he really is.

*Revolver* could have been printed by Harper & Row or Norton. The workmanship and layout is flawless, breathing down the necks of the biggest New York publishers. Sumac fills an empty spot. Where the big houses fail, the little ones, like Sumac, succeed.

## LONG EYE LOST WIND FORGIVE ME

Edward Harkness

Copperhead

Port Townsend, Washington, \$2.50 (paper)

There is a sense of authority in the poems of Edward Harkness, the confidence a man has in his ability to survive, the poet in his work. Ours is a world he takes little stock in: "Almost everything/ leaves much to be desired." And yet, he knows he belongs here. He's aware of his inadequacies, aware of his failures, and that makes his attitude even more courageous. He makes concessions and they lead him to victory, to success.

Just this once we  
make ourselves  
blind, remember  
nettles and  
not fitting in.

Harkness knows his strategy well: give ground, then let the poem swallow us. We are had.

The poems in this chapbook become a way of taking a stand. They demand and establish the dignity our world denies most of its inhabitants. They shove the despair and ugliness of our lives under our noses and then, rather than lapsing into a nihilistic funk, affirm



the whole damned mess. The reader is infected by a strange hopefulness, one that grows from the decay, from the concessions. In "Three Ducks," Harkness weaves a beautiful metaphor about time: the passing of it and, in those certain anxious moments like awaiting the birth of a child, the way it drags its cumbersome feet. He speaks to his unborn son:

Three ducks define the fragile sky, make  
it wild. The sky will wait for you. Linda  
and her dream will wait. You'll be banging  
on the cellar door after the tornado  
crying Is it okay to come out. And Linda,  
sunrise, singing the battered sky,  
singing Yes, the light is real.

How real it is. And what a fine celebration. It is an infectious optimism and Harkness has it in his blood. To prove it, here's a poem, complete, to show how beautiful things are made of scars, how life survives its own despairs and how poems grow from this ink, these simple words:

*5th Grade Scar*

Jimmy D. Martini had this fountain pen  
with peacock ink.

In the can we stared and said Neat.  
It wrote thick, spread on a paper towel  
blue you wished was your blood.

Jimmy was writing when I poked him,  
writing love.  
I think her name was Meridee.  
Furious, he stabbed me,  
right here on the invisible side  
of my face, below the eye.

Which I grabbed, hollered Ah God,  
squinted into my hand and  
there she was, blood.  
There she was, peacock ink.

For the past several years  
I've been making more scars on my face.  
I too have been writing love, love of my face,  
becoming fog.

Love of Jimmy and his ink  
that mized in my veins so now I bleed burgandy.  
And love of peacocks,  
their useless feathers,  
their thousand ruined eyes.

Edward Harkness will keep on writing love. This chapbook, promising and perfect as it seems, is surely just a note, a lovely example of things to come.

Copperhead chapbooks, if they all look like this, are almost impossible to beat. The printing and choice paper and the sewn wrappers show that, like the poets they print, they are masters.

*Robert Wrigley*

#### RAIN FIVE DAYS AND I LOVE IT

Richard Hugo

Graywolf Press

PO Box 142

Port Townsend, Washington 98368, \$2.50 (paper)

More often than not, a chapbook bespeaks a cohesion (of subject and emotional intensity) rarely found in a full-length collection of poems, and this beautifully produced new chapbook by Richard Hugo is no exception. Comprised of eight poems printed on three colors of heavy stock and in three colors of ink, it draws its cohesiveness from a place—the Port Townsend area—and from Hugo's complex attitude toward that place. As he does so frequently and so well, Hugo grounds us in the richness of local detail, and then allows those details to speak. But through some manner of alchemy, the eloquence of things is not separable from the things themselves; in